

Outreach Insider

USDA NRCS
Natural Resources Conservation Service

News, ideas, and information
on NRCS Outreach initiatives
and projects in Illinois

USDA

Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Outreach Message:



Bill Gradle
State Conservationist

Greetings! I had an opportunity to participate in a USDA Public Listening Forum in February to hear first-hand about the programs and services that we provide to our clients. I commend the USDA, CES, and SCWD staffs for planning, organizing and conducting this important event.

Despite a small turnout, the individuals and community representatives that were present raised several concerns. During the forum, I realized how important it is for us to ensure that we are effectively addressing the needs of our clients. There are a great number of individuals and communities throughout the state who need to be more aware of NRCS expertise and assistance available. We have to make sure that happens. Our client base has changed over the years and we need to do everything possible to assist all our clients by addressing resource concerns within their communities.

We all have worked extra hard over the past year addressing the needs of our valuable clients. Many of you have made tremendous accomplishments with your outreach efforts. None of those efforts have gone unnoticed. I do read through your quarterly reports before forwarding them to our Regional Office. I certainly appreciate everything that you have done.

I realize that we have achieved a lot, but our job as a state is not done. I encourage you to continue the efforts that you have been diligently working on over that past year, and also to pursue new opportunities. We must become more creative, taking advantage of opportunities that exist or arise with our partners.

Despite our current budget situation, we must continue to provide nothing less than the outstanding service our clients have come to expect.

Thank you and keep up the great work!

Willie J. Gradle
Illinois State Conservationist

What is Outreach?

Outreach is a way of conducting business that ensures underserved individuals and groups throughout the United States and its territories are made aware of, understand, and have a working knowledge of USDA programs and services. Outreach will ensure that these programs and services are equitable and made accessible to all.

Earth Team Volunteering is a Win-Win Situation



Partnering with area groups has resulted in yet another Win-Win situation for two organizations. In the latest case, students at the Macoupin Center for the Developmentally Disabled applied mailing labels to some 3,500 Macoupin County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) newsletters.

Eric Gerth, Soil Conservationist, Carlinville, has been a volunteer at the school's summer camps and at Special Olympic events for a number of years. Because of Eric's friendship with the students and teachers, he thought that they would like to help out with the labeling as a part of USDA's Earth Team Volunteer Program.

That program gives members of the community a chance to volunteer their time to support the work of the USDA and the Local SWCD's in conserving the nation's natural resources. In any case, several towns' newsletters were given to the school so the students could apply labels. They enjoyed the work so much that their teacher, Debi Hart, requested more newsletters from the District.

Things worked out well for those several days in late January because, just as Resource Conservationist Rhonda Koehne was discovering that the government's labeling machine was on the fritz, Hart's call for more newsletters came through. The remaining newsletters were brought over to the school.

"Our students just loved the sense of accomplishment they got from successfully completing this job," Hart said later. "It was also a help that they knew Eric Gerth and were aware of the fact that they were helping him. They really walked around proudly after doing that work," Hart added. "This is the task that kept the students' attention."

The school has let it be known that they would like to continue helping out the District in labeling newsletters. The District was so pleased that several weeks later Koehne, Gerth and Dan McCandless returned to the school once again to give them thanks and bring T-shirts and sweatshirts for their help.

Source: Macoupin County Inquirer

Pembroke Township Project Expands

Bob Gotkowski, DC, Kankakee County, is in the process of planning another farm demonstration project with producers in Pembroke Township. The 1998 organic soybean demonstration project went exceptionally, considering problems that arose during planting, and weed control concerns after crop emergence. Unlike conventional farming methods, organic farming requires intensive management to control weeds due to the inability to use commercial chemicals for weed control. In most instances weeds have to be controlled using cultural methods such as crop rotation, and intensive tillage.

Bob is planning to assist the Pembroke producers with expanding the farm demonstration project this year. A \$30,000 Sustainable Agricultural grant was obtained from the Illinois Department of Agriculture in February. The money will be used to continue and expand the organic corn/soybean plots and to complete the installation of a drip irrigation system for organic vegetable production. A hoop-type greenhouse will also be completed as a part of the project.

Mike Doherty, Cooperative Specialist, RD, continues to work with producers to

establish a farmer cooperative. The cooperative will provide a structured system whereby producers work together to produce, and market produce and other crops to markets in the Chicago area. The cooperative will also serve as a vehicle to purchase farm supplies and other material, which could result in savings for producers.

In addition to the farm demonstration and coop venture, Merrill Marxman, CED, is providing leadership with a free-range organic chicken project. Merle secured a \$10,000 Sustainable Agricultural Research and Education (SARE) grant to establish a demonstration project. The demonstration project will be coordinated with one producer from the community. There are, however, several producers in the community interested in the free-range chicken enterprise if the project is a success.

Southern Illinois Receives Empowerment Zone

Rural Development hosted a USDA information meeting on February 26th to update federal, state, and local employees on the recently approved Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone. Parts of Alexander, Pulaski, and Johnson Counties received the Empowerment Zone designation. The boundaries of the Empowerment Zone are based on census tract blocks, which typically follow physical boundaries.

Approved Empowerment Zones are established to stimulate economic growth through tax incentives and other means to benefit communities. The goal is to create jobs, training opportunities, improve infrastructure, and establish businesses offering sustained growth for the communities.

The Empowerment area is vastly different from any other area in the state. An inadequate infrastructure, low education, minimal job opportunities and other problems have plagued the entire area. Below are few community characteristics:

- 11% Unemployment rate
- 40% of the area population has less than a high school education
- 22% of the area population is on some form of public assistance
- 31% poverty rate
- Alexander and Pulaski are the two poorest counties in Illinois

Numerous state and federal agencies as well as community groups will partner to assist in this monstrous effort.

Shawnee Community College will serve as the fiscal agent for the zone, providing a support staff, office space, and technical assistance. Each of the County Boards has committed \$10,000 annually to support the zone. A Regional Planning Commission will also provide computer equipment.

A strategic plan has been developed to address the concerns of the community. The plan will primarily focus on the following:

- *Infrastructure – clean drinking water, safe sewage disposal systems, 24-hour emergency service, telecommunications, paved roads, etc;*
- *Economic Development – business expansion, recruitment and entrepreneurship training;*
- *Tourism Development – 300 jobs will exist as a result of developing tourist sites and services;*
- *Stronger Unity/Sense of Community – 300 people, reflecting diversity of the community, will plan or participate in new volunteer community building activities;*
- *Life-long Learning and Education – increase graduation rates and raise test scores, increase in the number of adults receiving their GED;*
- *Housing – increase number of residents in the zone who will have decent, affordable place to live.*
- *Health Care – Increased number of residents in the zone with access to affordable health care services.*

All of the partners are extremely excited about the project and are looking forward to its implementation. They hope to create many changes within the communities assisting with building a new community spirit



International Outreach in Chile

Michele Gidcumb, District Conservationist, Gallatin/Hardin Counties was featured in the International Programs Division's "News and Views" newsletter in March 1999. Michele's article tells of her trip to Santiago, Chile to participate in a conference sponsored by the "International Society for Ecological Economics," November 15-19, 1998. The purpose of the conference was to transfer information from private and government sectors, business and academia, to economic efficiency in growth without depleting global natural resources.

More than 800 foreign scientists and colleagues attended the conference, sharing information on economic growth research as it relates to the use of natural resources. Participants of the conference included the United Nations Earth Council Advisor/Secretary General; USDA representatives from the Forest Service and NRCS; universities; natural resource agencies; and businesses and private industries.

In addition to the conference, Michele was able to meet with Richard Blabey, Agricultural Counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Chile. Mr. Blabey expressed his appreciation for USDA, and especially NRCS for showing such an active interest in global sustainability.

Michele also visited two family farms to gain a better understanding of sustainable agricultural methods and the socio-economic and resource concerns of farmers in Chile, as well as to establish positive relationships. One of the farms that Michele visited was that of Carlos Crocetto, who lives in Chequen, which is near Concepcion.

Carlos, who is an agronomist, has maintained a relationship with NRCS since the 1970's. You may remember him from a no-till book that he wrote entitled "Stubble over the Soil," which was originally written in Spanish but later translated to English by an NRCS agronomist.

According to Michele, most of the farms in Chile are very different than those found in the U.S. Each farm is likely to have many "small" size operations. For example, one farm she visited had a vineyard for wine production and table grapes, walnut grove, lemon orchards, hog production, and a laying hen operation. Because their operations are very labor intensive, farm workers are hired for harvesting, packing as well as loading products.

The region of Chile that Michele visited is normally very droughty, with very little rainfall. Most producers in the area rely solely on irrigation water from snow melt in the mountains. Chile has suffered from a long-term drought causing hydroelectric plant shut downs daily, 8 A.M. to 11:00 A.M. to conserve water. Even the conference center where Michele met was without power during that time.

Michele hopes to maintain the relationship that she established with the Chile producers. She plans to organize a trip with a group of young farmers from her area to visit Chile and share ideas and information. She also thought that it would be very beneficial for Carlos to visit Gallatin and Hardin Counties to personally deliver his no-till message to Illinois farmers.

Resource Planning Guidebook Coming Soon

The importance of resource planning can not be overstated when working with our customers, especially underserved groups/communities who we haven't work much with before. As any group planning activity progresses, there will inevitably be a need to organize thoughts, document what needs to be done and identify what resources are available to complete the tasks. The Resource Planning Team has developed a guidebook to assist with planning efforts.

The Resource Planning Guidebook (RPG) is a source book for NRCS and SWCD and other conservation partners in Illinois to use when facilitating locally-led planning. Locally-led resource planning, or "Area-wide Planning," as its called in the NRCS National Planning Procedures Handbook, is the problem-solving and management process NRCS uses to help clients develop resource plans that meet locally-identified objectives.

With the resource planning process, we help citizens develop productive partnerships, resolve conflicts, make decisions, and obtain financial and technical resources to carry out their ideas. This demands that we draw upon our many talents in facilitating, leading, and partnering, and of course, our expertise in the natural resource sciences. The reward of resource planning is the enhanced ability of communities to manage their natural resources to meet their goals. The Resource Planning Guidebook can help staff and citizens alike meet these challenges. The purpose of the Resource Planning Guidebook is to:

- *Supplement the National Planning Procedures Guidebook.*
- *Empower Conservation Partners to carry out resource planning.*
- *Enhance communication between Conservation Partners and the public about the planning process.*

The RPG compliments the National Planning Procedures Handbook. The National Planning Procedures Handbook describes the policy and procedures pertaining to the resource planning process. To supplement this process-oriented material, the RPG gives detailed "insider tips" for carrying out resource planning at the local level.

The RPG will show you step by step what to do. It also explains why a particular step is important and suggests how to do it. The Guidebook has practical ideas for implementing locally-led planning, gleaned from our experience working with Illinois communities.

Refer to the RPG throughout the planning effort for help with identifying stakeholders, running effective meetings, involving the public, determining inventory needs, analyzing data, building local ownership of plans, implementing plans, and much more.

To help stakeholders understand the planning process, material in the RPG is also suitable for distribution to the public. For example, share "Organizing the Planning Committee" when your locally-led committee needs to decide how they will make decisions. "Working with the Media" will give the Planning Committee ideas for communicating their activities to the public. Use "Developing and Evaluating Alternatives" to help the Committee to understand this critical step in developing their resource plan.

These and other factsheets are protected in plastic sleeves in the RPG to ensure clean copies are available for you to duplicate. The RPG has also been formatted in a 3-ring binder to encourage you to insert updated information or other material you find helpful.

Resource planning is driven by local needs, local people, and local action. The Resource Planning Guidebook can help you facilitate resource planning so that local people develop and implement plans that protect, conserve and enhance natural resources within their social and economic interests.

The RPG will be available to field offices later this summer.

Welcome to "The Underground"

The Field Museum in Chicago unveiled "The Underground" soils exhibit on Tuesday, March 25, 1999. Nearly 38,000 visitors attended over the first four days. The

display, which cost more than \$10 million dollars, will be used as a permanent exhibit focusing on educating visitors about prairie soils. Horace Smith, National Soil Survey Director, NRCS, provided his perspective on soils and where we need to go in the next millennium during the ceremony.

The Illinois NRCS played a significant role in collaborating with the Field Museum to develop the exhibit. Bob McCleese, Don Fehrenbacher, Mark Bramstedt, and others provided soils information as well as pictures that were utilized in displays. Illinois Soils Scientists Mack Hodges and Don Fehrenbacher both have their pictures prominently displayed as a part of the exhibit. The exhibit will enlighten residents of the Chicago area and visitors from around the world to the importance of soils and what we must do to conserve this valuable resource. The display will certainly acquaint nontraditional clients with NRCS and what we do as an agency. If you visit the Chicago area, you will not regret a trip to view the exhibit.

District Conservationist Assist with Teaching English

In addition to corn and soybeans, Gallatin County has quite a bit of vegetable farming. In the past, migrant workers came to Gallatin County during the summer harvest to find work. With the growth of vegetable production, so grew the population of Spanish speaking people in the county. Gallatin County now has some permanent Spanish-speaking residents. The Mexican families attend the county schools and churches, and have become part of the community.

Through a state language grant, a bilingual teacher was hired to teach English to the migrant workers and their families.



The Underground exhibit, which opened to the public on March 27, received nearly 38,000 visitors over the first four days of the opening.

The class meets for eight weeks on Saturday nights. Michele Gidcumb, District Conservationist of Gallatin/Hardin Counties, and her husband take time out of their weekend to attend the classes. Michele and her husband enjoy working with the families. By doing the exercises in groups, the Mexican families are learning conversational English. Michele speaks limited Spanish, but hopes to learn more so she can communicate with the migrant workers in their own language while in the field.



What's Happening in Illinois?

Producers Pool Resources for Produce Project

Roscoe Allen, Outreach Team Leader, is assisting a group of small and limited resource producers in southern Illinois to coordinate a six-acre vegetable project. The producers have pooled their resources to produce fresh vegetables to be sold in Mt. Vernon and East St. Louis open-air markets. The producers plan to work with NRCS and the University of Illinois Extension to produce a multitude of organic vegetables. Their goal for this year is to simply experiment with producing various vegetable crops and to establish viable markets for the produce.

Roscoe and Mike Doherty, Cooperative Specialist, RD, recently met with the producers to explain how a farmer cooperative operates and what the benefits are for establishing such an enterprise.

Elsberry Plant Material Center Supporting East St. Louis

The Elsberry Plant Material Center is supporting an urban beautification effort in the East St. Louis metro area by providing seedlings to the East St. Louis Park District. The Park District built a greenhouse in 1996 as part of an Urban Resource Partnership (URP) project. The greenhouse was established to produce flowers, shrubs and other plants for beautification projects in the East St. Louis area.

Since the greenhouse was built, the Park District has successfully worked with residents to clean-up vacant lots and other areas to beautify the area.



Outreach Reporting

Macoupin County SWCD Conduct Clothing Drive

The Macoupin County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) collected more than 168 pounds of clothing for needy children on the White Earth Indian Reservation in Minnesota. The District placed an advertisement in the SWCD newsletter and received an overwhelming response from Macoupin County residents. Because of the success of the clothing drive, the District is considering another drive later this year.

The tribe was extremely appreciative of the generous gift from the District, and to show their appreciation the office staff and the community of the White Earth Reservation sent the District a "che-Miigwech" (BIG THANK YOU).

Make A Connection!

Get NRCS products and services into the hands of ALL who need them!

Internet Connections

Outreach Website

An Illinois outreach website has been established to provide resource information. The site provides general outreach information on developing an outreach strategy and it has links to other agencies, possible funding sources, and other valuable information. The Illinois NRCS outreach website can be accessed at:

www.il.nrcs.usda.gov/outreach/Outreach.html

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

A complete listing of funding sources are available through the USEPA Region 5 website located at:

www.epa.gov/seahome/resources/funding_sources.htm

Grant Info On-Line

"Grant News," a grant listing newsletter produced by the Illinois State University Applied Social Research Unit is now available on-line. The newsletter lists grant opportunities available from various private and public sources. "Grant News" can be accessed at:

www.socialresearch.ilstu.edu/asru/publications.htm

Demographic Information

The U.S. Census Bureau has a very useful site for obtaining census data. The site permits users to develop demographic tables and maps by selecting various characteristics of states, counties, areas or communities. The site can be assessed at:

www.census.gov (then click on) Data Access Tools, The American FactFinder.

This information is very helpful in providing demographic information for outreach or resource planning efforts.

Who Do I Call With Outreach Questions?

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If you have an outreach related article, story idea, or success story to share, please send it to:

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